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A WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE

By SIDNEY ZION; Sidney Zion is a veteran journalist. His first book, "Read All About It," will be available next winter.

BY BLOOD AND FIRE The Attack on the King David Hotel. By Thurston Clarke. Illustrated. 304 pp. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$12.95.

THURSTON CLARKE may not know it, but by focusing on the bombing of Jerusalem's King David Hotel in the summer of 1946 - probably the most spectacular action of the Jewish underground against the British Mandatory Government - he has made clear that a war of liberation was indeed fought in the Holy Land. It diminishes the author, but not the importance of his book, that he can't see the revolution for the terrorism.

Few others have been able to see Israel as a nation that earned its independence through a bloody revolt against a colonial power. Instead, the received opinion holds that the Jews got their country by resolution of a United Nations dominated by the United States and guilt-ridden over the destruction of European Jewry.

The facts are otherwise. Israel was created despite the United Nations, which tried to stifle it at birth with a partition that would have left it without defensible borders, and despite the United States, whose arms embargo exposed the Jews to Arabs who were abundantly supplied with weapons by the British. And world guilt had nothing to do with Israel's proclamation of statehood: Jews were penned in concentration camps in Europe and Cyprus in 1948.

Israel was won, as the title of Mr. Clarke's book might well indicate, by "blood and fire" in the first of the great anticolonial uprisings that multiplied after World War II. That this is news, even to most Israelis, is in its way as astonishing as the rebirth of the Jewish State itself.

Has any other nation denied its revolution? The Israelis celebrate a war of independence, to be sure. But the war they refer to was fought exclusively against the Arabs, and began the day after independence was declared, when the Arab armies attacked the new state. Israel's history books have no name for the classic rebellion that freed the country from the yoke of the British Empire; it's as though the American Revolution were fought in 1812, or against the Indians and not the English.

But one can't read Mr. Clarke's gripping account of the Irgun Zvai Leumi's dynamiting of the south wing of the King David Hotel - which housed the British Administration and so stood as the symbol of colonial rule in Palestine - without knowing that nobody handed the Jews a country. Therein lies the book's value: If the revolt were a matter of common knowledge, "By Blood and Fire" would be of parochial interest to students and a possible jackpot for Hollywood movie moguls. It could make a stunning film. The author's use of the minute-by-minute literary time bomb device is so effective that the reader is surprised when the

hotel blows up, even though history foretells the result. And Mr. Clarke's interviews with the dramatis personae - the planners and bombers, the victims and relatives, the politicians and eyewitnesses - are penetrating, instructive and generally evenhanded.

Had Mr. Clarke been satisfied to leave it at that, to remain a nonjudgmental journalist, his work would have been, without exception, a clear contribution to modern Middle Eastern history. In the end, however, his conclusions betray both his prejudice and the facts he has so carefully detailed and uncovered.

The attack on the King David, indeed the Irgun revolt in general, merely "accelerated" Britain's departure from Palestine according to the author. "The Second World War," he says, "not the Irgun, had robbed Britain of the resources and will to maintain an empire." Mr. Clarke presents no evidence to support his analysis. He notes that the English managed to send 80,000 troops to the Holy Land in an effort to quash the rebellion, but he somehow loses sight of that fact. Since he has otherwise made a meticulous effort to back up his findings with facts, one can suspect that his failure to see the revolution as anything more than a series of "terrorist outrages" stems from the overwhelming propaganda assault that began as an internecine battle among Zionists.

Israel rejected its revolution because the "wrong people" fought the British. The struggle was carried by the Irgun and its tiny fierce sidekick, the Stern Gang. The Haganah, the "official" underground army, was kept out of the fray by order of the Jewish Agency, the shadow government that ruled the Jewish population during the Mandate. In fact, the Jewish Agency was committed to a policy of cooperation - and perhaps even collaboration - with the English. It used the Haganah to villify, inform upon, kidnap and torture Irgun soldiers - except for a nine-month period beginning in September 1945. During that time, the Haganah joined the Irgun and the Stern Gang in a united resistance to the British. The union worked so effectively that the British retaliated on June 29, 1946 - Black Saturday - by arresting nearly all the leaders of the Jewish Agency.

The attack on the King David three weeks later, which was to answer the mass arrest, was authorized by the Haganah. When 91 people, including 17 Jews, died in the bombing, the Haganah denounced the action, withdrew its forces from the Resistance and laid away its arms until the Irgun and the Stern Gang drove the British from the country. David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency, led the denunciation of the bombing from his quarters in a Paris hotel: "The Irgun is the enemy of the Jewish people." In time, the British released the Jewish Agency officials, and on May 14, 1948, the day the British evacuated, Ben-Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel and declared himself its provisional Prime Minister.

Mr. Clarke details all of this. The pity is that he remains blind to its implications. Had he noticed the revolution, he might not have referred to the bombing of the King David as an "outrage" and to members of the Irgun as "terrorists" comparable to the Palestine Liberation Organization. The British had consistently sided with the Arabs, and by cutting off Jewish immigration to Palestine in 1939 had abrogated England's League of Nations mandate. Furthermore, though the loss of innocent life at the King David was indeed an outrage, it was one that could have been avoided had the British heeded the Irgun's warnings to evacuate the hotel. (Mr. Clarke clears up what has been a controversy since the explosion: These warnings were made, no doubt about it.)

But the fundamental pity is that Israel remains blind to the implications of the bombing of the King David, and continues to ignore its own heroic birth in favor of a theory of immaculate conception.

Illustrations: photo of a commando soldier fighting into a blaze

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